

Right-wing parties monopolize Polish parliamentary election

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10 October 2015

Less than a month before parliamentary (Sejm) elections, opinion polls suggest that the ruling neo-liberal Civic Platform (PO) is trailing the conservative Law and Justice party (PiS) by more than 10 percent. In May the PO's presidential candidate, Bronisław Komorowski, lost out in the presidential election to Andrzej Duda of the PiS, setting the stage for a strong challenge to the incumbent party in the upcoming election from the even more right-wing opposition.

The pro-European Union PO, in coalition with the agrarian Polish People's Party (PSL), was the only ruling party to win reelection since the reintroduction of capitalism in Poland in 1989. Now the PO has the support of just 24 percent of the vote, while the PiS is predicted to win in October, currently polling at approximately 37 percent of the vote.

Hostility towards the PO-led ruling elite is widespread due to the government's implementation of brutal austerity measures, leading to stagnating wages, chronic unemployment and growing social inequality. Political scandals plaguing the PO government led to the panic reshuffling of ministry personnel in June. Under the leadership of Donald Tusk as prime minister and, since September 2014, Ewa Kopacz (also PO), the government has persisted with a policy based on welfare cuts and deregulation in line with the free-market programs demanded by the EU, international investors and the banks.

The PO government is responsible for some of the most anti-social legislation in Poland's modern history. In 2012 it signed a statute raising the retirement age to 67, where previously it was 60 for women and 65 for men. It also introduced a health care "reform" that was a vicious attack on the nationalized health care system, under which "unprofitable" hospitals and clinics were privatized and higher charges imposed for medical treatment and drugs. In the name of the free-market transformation of the economy the government continued forced and accelerated privatization, and liquidation of key publicly owned industries such as steel, coalmining and shipbuilding.

The PO-PSL administration also contributed to the further deterioration of public transportation through additional cuts and privatization at the already dismembered Polish State Railways system (PKP). It also undertook an assault on education and cultural institutions, liquidating public schools, destroying technical and occupational high schools, decreasing the educational budget and subsidizing private schools for the affluent minority.

In 2011 the Tusk government raised the sales tax for products and services (Value Added Tax, VAT) from 22 percent to 23 percent, and from 7 percent to 8 percent for foodstuffs, books and newspapers. In 2009, it adopted an "anti-crisis package," permitting even further deregulation of labour laws, allowing the introduction of short-time contracts, so-called "junk agreements." Currently, about 3 million people work under such temporary or no contract employment agreements, deprived of health insurance, job security, paid vacation time or the right to join a union. The PO-PSL coalition government is also responsible for layoffs in the public sector, as well as frozen wages and pensions.

Wages in Poland are amongst the lowest in the European Union. The median gross monthly salary is calculated at 3942 zoty (€939) but in reality, very few workers enjoy such earnings. According to the Polish Central Statistical Office (GUS) the vast majority, or about 80.5 percent of the population, earns less than 3549 zoty (€845) a month, including more than 800,000 workers who earn poverty wages of less than 1181 zoty (€281) per month. The monthly average retirement pension in Poland stands at approximately 1921 zoty (€457). One in five retirees lives in extreme poverty, earning less than 1000 zoty (€238) a month. The monthly minimum retirement and disability pension is set at 880.45 zoty (€210).

As part of its election campaign, the PO has promised to raise the minimum wage and lower taxes. At the party's convention held earlier this month, Ewa Kopacz suggested lowering the income tax rate (PIT) for the "poorest" families with children, currently 18 percent, to 10 percent and to 39.5 percent for those in the highest income bracket. Such

promises, however, lack any credibility from a party that formerly attempted to implement a flat tax rate of 15 percent for personal and corporate income tax, as well as VAT, i.e., a tax structure benefiting society's wealthiest individuals.

According to experts from *Dziennik Gazeta Prawna* (Daily Law Newspaper), the party's proposed changes would most likely provide the most gains to well-off individuals and families with children in which both parents are top earners.

In the area of foreign policy, the PO-led government has consistently supported every imperialist war waged by NATO, pledging to spend 2 percent of the country's annual GDP (roughly 130 billion z?/€31 billion by 2022) on the defense budget, aggressively building up the country's military forces and approving the stationing of an American anti-missile defense system in preparation for a war with Russia.

It took part in preparing and backing the fascist putsch in Ukraine, helping to train the right-wing forces involved in the bloody civil war and integrating neo-fascist paramilitary groups into its army. Despite the projected budget deficit of 54.6 billion z? (€13 billion) for 2016, allegedly requiring further cuts to social spending, the administration recently approved a huge €100 million loan to Ukraine to improve modernization of the country's infrastructure.

Kopacz's government also rejected the European Union's mandatory immigration quota, finally agreeing to accept just 4,500 to 5,000 refugees. The current administration is directly responsible for the racist anti-immigration and anti-Muslim hysteria set in motion by the media, with discriminatory preferences to refugees from "ethnically similar" backgrounds (Belarusians and Ukrainians).

The PO's main election challenger, the extreme nationalist PiS, affiliated with former prime minister Jarosław Kaczyński (2006-2007) and his late identical twin and former president (2005-2010) Lech, has used the ground prepared by the PO to develop an even more aggressive policy against refugees.

During a recent parliamentary debate, Kaczyński denounced EU proposals to accept refugees from the Middle East who "might have a negative influence on the life and security of our citizens" and blamed Germany for creating an attractive social welfare system that lures immigrants. "It is Germany's problem, not ours," he said. Kaczyński spoke in favor of helping finance refugee camps outside of Europe instead of accepting asylum seekers within Polish borders.

The PiS is exploiting the immense social anger, despair and frustration produced by the PO government to advance an extreme right-wing agenda. It connects promises for increased benefits for children, free medications for the elderly and lowered corporate income tax (CIT) for small businesses with nationalism and backwardness. It aims to

mobilize the most backward layers of society in order to suppress working class opposition.

Once in power the social promises will be thrown overboard rapidly and the party will build an authoritarian regime. During the party's rule between 2005 and 2007, Kaczyński's government lowered taxes for the wealthiest individuals, greatly contributing to the budget deficit, maintained the austerity measures of the previous government, pacified the nurses' protest with the use of police, called for the introduction of the death penalty and imposed further restrictions on already strict abortion rights for women. It also began the process of increased criminalization of the poor in the form of evictions and prison sentences for minor crimes.

As part of a campaign to impose censorship and allegedly fight "crimes against Poland's economic interests," in 2006 Justice Minister Zbigniew Ziobro created the Central Anti-Corruption Bureau (CBA) that utilized the methods of the secret service to spy on corporate and private institutions and individuals. The CBA is responsible for many false accusations and the suicide of a former minister who is alleged to have taken a bribe. The PO's appeal to try Ziobro for his crimes in front of the State Tribunal was rejected by the parliament last week.

Should Kaczyński's party return to power, the European Union faces yet another force intent on its disintegration. The extreme nationalist and anti-EU PiS, although not likely to completely dissolve European alliances that help finance the country's development, will undoubtedly seek closer ties with the United States, as well as reinforcing the bloc of Eastern Europe opposed to Germany and Russia.

The latest developments in Poland indicate the country's ruling elite is shifting further to the right, favouring more aggressive military policies against Russia and attacks on workers' rights at home. All of the parties running in the parliamentary elections are pro-capitalist defenders of the low-wage welfare system and the super exploitation and subordination of Polish workers to the affluent minority. All parties support rapid militarization and support for the imperialist interventions under the banner of the war on terror and support for human rights.



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